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For Young Latino Readers, an Image Is Missing

By **MOTOKO RICH**

PHILADELPHIA — Like many of his third-grade classmates, Mario Cortez-Pacheco likes reading the “Magic Tree House” series, about a brother and a sister who take adventurous trips back in time. He also loves the popular “Diary of a Wimpy Kid” graphic novels.

But Mario, 8, has noticed something about these and many of the other books he encounters in his classroom at Bayard Taylor Elementary here: most of the main characters are white. “I see a lot of people that don’t have a lot of color,” he said.

Hispanic students now make up nearly a quarter of the nation’s public school enrollment, according to an analysis of census data by the Pew Hispanic Center, and are the fastest-growing segment of the school population. Yet nonwhite Latino children seldom see themselves in books written for young readers. (Dora the Explorer, who began as a cartoon character, is an outlier.)

Education experts and teachers who work with large Latino populations say that the lack of familiar images could be an obstacle as young readers work to build stamina and deepen their understanding of story elements like character motivation.

While there are exceptions, including books by Julia Alvarez, Pam Muñoz Ryan, Alma Flor Ada and Gary Soto, what is available is “not finding its way into classrooms,” said Patricia Enciso, an associate professor at Ohio State University. Books commonly read by elementary school children — those with human characters rather than talking animals or wizards — include the Junie B. Jones, Cam Jansen, Judy Moody, Stink and Big Nate series, all of which feature a white protagonist. An occasional African-American, Asian or Hispanic character may pop up in a supporting role, but these books depict a predominantly white, suburban milieu.

“Kids do have a different kind of connection when they see a character that looks like them or they experience a plot or a theme that relates to something they’ve experienced in their lives,” said Jane Fleming, an assistant professor at the Erikson Institute, a graduate school in early childhood development in Chicago.

She and Sandy Ruvalcaba Carrillo, an elementary school teacher in Chicago who works with students who speak languages other than English at home, reviewed 250 book series aimed at second to fourth graders and found just two that featured a Latino main character.

The Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, which compiles statistics about the race of authors and characters in children's books published each year, found that in 2011, just over 3 percent of the 3,400 books reviewed were written by or about Latinos, a proportion that has not changed much in a decade.

As schools across the country implement the Common Core — national standards for what students should learn in English and math — many teachers are questioning whether nonwhite students are seeing themselves reflected in their reading.

For the early elementary grades, lists of suggested books contain some written by African-American authors about black characters, but few by Latino writers or featuring Hispanic characters. Now, in response to concerns registered by the Southern Poverty Law Center and others, the architects of the Common Core are developing a more diverse supplemental list. "We have really taken a careful look, and really think there is a problem," said Susan Pimentel, one of the lead writers of the standards for English language and literacy. "We are determined to make this right."

Black, Asian and American Indian children similarly must dig deep into bookshelves to find characters who look like them. Latino children who speak Spanish at home and arrive at school with little exposure to books in English face particular challenges. A new study being released next week by pediatricians and sociologists at the University of California shows that Latino children start school seven months behind their white peers, on average, in oral language and preliteracy skills.

"Their oral language use is going to be quite different from what they encounter in their books," said Catherine E. Snow, a professor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. "So what might seem like simple and accessible text for a standard English speaker might be puzzling for such kids."

Hispanic children have historically underperformed non-Hispanic whites in American schools. According to 2011 data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a set of exams administered by the Department of Education, 18 percent of Hispanic fourth graders were proficient in reading, compared with 44 percent of white fourth graders.

Research on a direct link between cultural relevance in books and reading achievement at young ages is so far scant. And few academics or classroom teachers would argue that Latino children should read books only about Hispanic characters or families. But their relative absence troubles some education advocates.

"If all they read is Judy Blume or characters in the "Magic Treehouse" series who are white and go on adventures," said Mariana Souto-Manning, an associate professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, "they start thinking of their language or practices or familiar places and values as not belonging in school."

At Bayard Taylor Elementary in Philadelphia, a school where three-quarters of the students are Latino, Kimberly Blake, a third-grade bilingual teacher, said she struggles to find books about Latino children that are "about normal, everyday people." The few that are available tend to focus on stereotypes of migrant workers or on special holidays. "Our students look the way they look every single day of the year," Ms. Blake said, "not just on Cinco de Mayo or Puerto Rican Day."

On a recent morning, Ms. Blake read from "Amelia's Road" by Linda Jacobs Altman, about a daughter of migrant workers. Of all the children sitting cross-legged on the rug, only Mario said that his mother had worked on farms.

Publishers say they want to find more works by Hispanic authors, and in some cases they insert Latino characters in new titles. When Simon & Schuster commissioned writers to develop a new series, "The Cupcake Diaries," it cast one character, Mia, as a Latino girl. "We were conscious of making one of the characters Hispanic," said Valerie Garfield, a vice president in the children's division, "and doing it in a way that girls could identify with, but not in a way that calls it out."

In some respects, textbook publishers like Pearson and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt are ahead of trade publishers. Houghton Mifflin, which publishes reading textbooks, allocates exactly 18.6 percent of its content to works featuring Latino characters. The company says that percentage reflects student demographics.

Students should be able "to see themselves in a high-quality text," said Jeff Byrd, senior product manager for reading at Houghton Mifflin.

But Latino education advocates and authors say they do not want schools to resort to tokenism. "My skin crawls a little when this literature is introduced because people are being righteous," said Ms. Alvarez, the author of the "Tia Lola" series, as well as "Return to

Sender.” “It should be as natural reading about these characters as white characters,” she said.

At Bayard Taylor, another third-grade teacher, Kate Cornell, said that she would love to explore more options featuring Hispanic characters. “It would be more helpful as a teacher,” she said, “to have these go-to books where I can say ‘I think you are going to like this book. This book reminds me of you.’ ”